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'Contra' says U.S. aid is worth heavy price

By Robert Parry
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Nicaraguan rebels are willing to accept heavy casualties in seizing and holding territory inside Nicaragua if such action is needed to win renewed U.S. aid from Congress, the leader of the chief rebel group said yesterday.

"It would be costly for us, but to get the funds we'll pay that price," said Enrique Bermudez, military commander of the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the rebel army based in Honduras and known by its Spanish initials FDN.

At a news conference, Bermudez also labeled as "propaganda" allegations by Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government that his troops were continuing to commit serious human rights abuses.

However, the Americas Watch Committee, which yesterday issued a report containing such allegations,

responded that none of its information had come from the Sandinista government.

The 97-page report by the private human rights group based in New York said that all sides in the Nicaraguan conflict had violated laws of war but added that the government had reduced its abuses in the last year while those of the *contra* rebels had continued unchecked.

Americas Watch also said the Reagan administration had "aided and abetted" the rebel abuses by financing and defending them. It added that by producing a rebel manual with advice on "neutralizing" Nicaraguan officials, the CIA had "directly solicited the contras to engage in violations of the laws of war."

President Reagan, in recent appeals for renewal of U.S. aid to the rebels, has praised them as "freedom fighters" and the "moral equal of our Founding Fathers." He has de-

nounced the Sandinistas as "totalitarian ... brutal ... cruel."

In the new report, entitled "Violations of the Laws of War by Both Sides in Nicaragua," Americas Watch said the rebels had launched indiscriminate attacks on civilians, tortured and mutilated prisoners, slain injured soldiers, taken hostages and raped women.

The report said the Sandinista government massacred 14 to 17 Miskito Indians in 1981 and seven others in 1982. But Americas Watch said its evidence "shows a sharp decline in violations" by government forces after 1982, despite some abuses as recently as a year ago.

Reagan has denied that the CIA manual, entitled "Psychological Operations in Guerrilla War," encouraged assassinations, although several passages advised the rebels on political violence, including one section on the "selective use of violence" to neutralize Nicaraguan officials.

But Americas Watch asked: "Does anyone believe that an instruction to neutralize violently means something other than assassination?"

Bermudez appeared at the Washington news conference with three FDN field commanders as part of the rebels' campaign to convince Congress and the American public that the insurgents deserve renewed U.S. backing. The CIA funneled \$80 million to the rebels from 1981 to last June, before Congress stopped the aid. Reagan is seeking \$14 million more.

Bermudez described congressional backing for the rebels as vital if the insurgents are to maintain morale and continue receiving assistance from other sources, whom he would not identify.

He said it would be "a psychological victory for the Sandinistas if Con-

gress does not approve the aid." He added that with sufficient backing, the rebels could defeat the government this year, or at least force it to make major political concessions.

Told that some members of Congress were unwilling to continue backing a movement that has held no significant territory, Bermudez said his forces "have the capacity" to do that but feared a set-piece battle would give the Sandinistas "an opportunity of inflicting a single defeat on us."

But he added: "If that's necessary, we'd do it."

FDN forces tried to seize towns in northern Nicaragua in late 1983 but were beaten back by the Sandinistas.

Commander Tigrillo, the pseudonym of one of the three officers with Bermudez, said the FDN does effectively control some territory in northern Nicaragua after destroying a number of army barracks.